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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAGUA 001448

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/04/2018
TAGS: ASEC EAIR ECON PTER NU
SUBJECT: NICARAGUA AVIATION UPDATE - AIRLINES TSA
COMPLIANT, BUT CONCERNs REMAIN

REF: A. (A) MANAGUA 01275
 1B. (B) MANAGUA 02618
 1C. (C) MANAGUA 01180

Classified By: Charge d'affaires, a.i. Richard M. Sanders,
reasons 1.4 (b, d)

11. (C) Summary: The security situation at Managua's Augusto C. Sandino International Airport is mixed. From October 20 to 24, 2008, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) conducted a successful inspection of airlines and cargo carriers that fly directly from Sandino International Airport to the U.S. TSA found air carrier security procedures to be in compliance with TSA-mandated security programs. Airline representatives, in addition, report some recent improvement in security. Nonetheless, Post's experience has been that cooperation by GON airport officials with Embassy Managua personnel has deteriorated sharply. In September, the Nicaraguan airport authorities canceled all existing Embassy airport access passes and limited the issuance of new passes. Not long before, local newspapers had reported that Managua airport security officials facilitated the transit of members of the FARC, entering Nicaragua from Venezuela at the invitation of President Ortega, through the airport without immigration or other documentation checks. End Summary.

TSA AIR CARRIER SECURITY INSPECTION RESULTS POSITIVE

12. (U) From October 20 to 24, 2008, TSA conducted a successful inspection of airlines and cargo carriers, receiving good cooperation on the part of the Nicaraguan civil aviation and airport authorities. TSA inspected all air carriers flying directly from Managua's Augusto C. Sandino International Airport to the United States. After observing all U.S.-bound flights from American, Delta, Continental, Spirit and TACA airlines, TSA found them to be in compliance with the Aircraft Operator Standard Security Program and the Model Security Program.

13. (U) The inspection focused on air carrier control of passenger processing, screening and movement; baggage security; boarding processes and control of access to the aircraft; airport ID display and challenge procedures; and security controls on cargo, mail and catering supplies. There was also a special focus on liquid, aerosol and gel security procedures.

14. (U) Managua's Augusto C. Sandino International Airport is a Class II airport, based on flight volume and other factors, and is subject to an airport security inspection by the TSA every two years. TSA's recent inspection was not an inspection of airport security, but of air carrier security. Sandino Airport was last inspected by TSA in late 2007, and is due for another inspection in 2010. The date of the next inspection may be moved up if requested by Post. Because TSA

relies on the cooperation of host country officials during an overseas inspection, a surprise inspection is not possible. Consequently, both airport security officials and airline officials were aware of the inspection by the time it took place.

INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

¶15. (U) On October 8, 2008, prior to the TSA inspection, the Embassy hosted its quarterly meeting with representatives of airlines with direct flights to the U.S. The airlines reported a general improvement in previous problematic areas. Luggage theft had declined significantly since the identification and arrest of a gang of six airport military security officers responsible for a rash of pilfering (Ref B). Other concerns, such as the security provided by the Nicaraguan Army and auditing pressure from the Nicaraguan Tax Administration, had abated or been resolved. With respect to the effect of the global economic crisis on their operations in Nicaragua, airline officials are cautiously optimistic. Summer 2008 was a strong season, but business is way down and the future is uncertain. A decline in fuel prices has helped, but carriers may still have to go to smaller planes with less capacity if economic conditions continue to deteriorate. Cargo traffic, particularly northbound, is already declining.

AIRPORT COOPERATION WITH EMBASSIES DETERIORATES

¶16. (C) The cooperation afforded to TSA contrasts starkly with the recent and sharp deterioration of cooperation by GON airport officials with Embassy Managua personnel. Post's ability to observe airport security and facilitate official visits on a day-to-day basis has been severely limited by the cancellation of all existing airport access passes and limited issuance of new passes (Ref A). Diplomatic missions are now allowed a maximum of three passes per mission, no matter the size of the mission, which must be applied for on a daily basis. In early 2008, President Ortega installed former Nicaraguan National Police Commissioner Denis Perez, an Ortega loyalist, as head of security at the airport, undermining the authority of the Nicaraguan Armed Forces Defense Information Directorate, which by Nicaraguan regulation is responsible for airport security.

¶17. (C) More worrisome are newspaper reports and information gathered by Post that Managua airport security officials have facilitated the transit of individuals who may be unfriendly to the U.S., such as members of the FARC who entered Nicaragua from Venezuela in July at the invitation of President Ortega, without immigration or other documentation.

Media reports and Post reporting indicate that the GON has most likely issued genuine Nicaraguan identification documents to individuals traveling under false pretenses, including to at least one FARC-related individual (Ref C). Although TSA's mandate in Managua was to inspect airline security, and not airport security, post met twice with the TSA team to relay its concerns about undocumented travelers moving through Sandino International Airport. TSA's conclusion, based on its inspection, was that air carrier security procedures at Sandino Airport, which include passenger manifest checks and instant communication with DHS/CBP's Advanced Passenger Information System (APIS), were sufficient to prevent undocumented or unchecked individuals entering the U.S. on an aircraft from Nicaragua.

¶18. (C) Comment: Without unfettered access to secure areas of the airport as it had in the past, Post's Regional Security Office is unable to observe the airport for security issues, and to assist appropriately with official visits. The lack of airport access also hinders the Embassy's ability to manage routine operations relating to air shipments and diplomatic pouches. Moreover, the GON has demonstrated its disregard for security procedures and immigration checks when

it comes to ushering individuals from Venezuela or the FARC into and out of the country. Evidence suggests that the government may be issuing genuine Nicaraguan documents to these persons. Such documents could provide a way for malafide travelers to circumvent APIS controls, and to travel to contiguous countries without serious impediment - all the way to Guatemala's border with Mexico. We are glad that air carriers have maintained appropriate security procedures to make up for official failings. But at this time, we are not confident in the GON's commitment to airport security, and do not expect the situation to improve anytime soon.

SANDERS